



City of Morgan Hill

City Council Staff Report

File #: 14-508, Agenda Date: 2/4/2015, Version: 3

CITY COUNCIL STAFF REPORT **MEETING DATE: FEBRUARY 4, 2015**

PREPARED BY: Chris Ghione, Community Services Director/Community Services
APPROVED BY: City Manager

EL TORO TRAIL ACCESS STRATEGY

RECOMMENDATION(S):

Approve the proposed access strategy for future development of the El Toro Trail.

COUNCIL PRIORITIES SUPPORTED:

Ongoing Priorities

Protecting the Environment

Annual Priorities

Finance & Advocate for Infrastructure Improvements

NARRATIVE:

Development of the El Toro Trail project has been in the City's Capital Improvement Program (CIP) for the last two years. The purpose of the trail project is to provide an environmentally friendly access to the El Toro Mountain while restoring the current path directly up the mountain to its natural state.

In 2002, City Council approved a request to support a Natural Resources Study (Trails Master Plan) to supplement the Bikeways Master Plan. In 2007, this plan was approved by the City Council, which includes access to El Toro Mountain. In early 2013, the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority (OSA) purchased land to the south of the City owned property on the El Toro Mountain and for the last two years the City has been working with the OSA on joint trail planning.

The planning for this trail has been discussed with the community for several years and included the meetings outlined below, as well as a number of meetings between individual residents and City staff.

May 14, 2007	Community Meeting for comments on the Natural Resources Study
October 21, 2007	PRC Meeting on Natural Resources Study
November 7, 2007	City Council discusses and approves the Natural Resources Study
June 2, 2012	Community Meeting on the El Toro Trail Project
January 1, 2013	PRC Community Workshop to discuss the El Toro Trail Project
March 19, 2013	PRC Meeting with El Toro Trail Item

October 14, 2013	Morgan Hill PD meet with Via Grande neighborhood on trail related concerns
July 15, 2014	PRC reviews El Toro Trail History and sets special meeting for workshop
September 4, 2014	PRC Workshop to Review and provide input on the trail Access Strategy

Currently, there is additional property on the mountain that could be beneficial to the trail development. However, before pursuing the purchase of additional land for the trail or developing detailed trail plans, it is essential to determine from where the trail will be accessed. To help aid in this planning, City staff developed an access strategy for the trail. The proposed access strategy was presented to the community and the Parks and Recreation Commission on September 4, 2014. The access strategy was developed to determine the locations of where access to the El Toro Mountain would take place from. Currently there are multiple locations that are utilized to access the unofficial trail network that exists on the mountain. The premise of the originally developed access strategy was providing for multiple ways to access the trail. Access included a trailhead location at DeWitt Avenue north of Spring Avenue that would serve as the primary access for trail users and would be planned to provide for vehicle parking. Additional access in the original strategy included neighborhood access points, which planned to provide access to the trail from areas where the current unofficial trail is being accessed from. Multiple locations for the neighborhood access points were included to help spread out the access and mitigate impacts on the neighborhood residents.

At the September 4th Parks and Recreation Commission Meeting several residents were in attendance. Many were opposed to the neighborhood access points near their residences, some were opposed to the trail in general, and a minority was in favor of the trail access strategy as developed. The Commission, after taking public input, recommended that the strategy only include a single trailhead and no neighborhood access points. The Commission's recommendation was that the Access Strategy be updated to incorporate the following principles:

1. Creating one primary trail head: Primary trail head to have typical amenities such as parking lot, information kiosk, and potential restroom facilities. Public information should market primary trail head for those inclined to drive and park.
2. Focusing the location of a primary trailhead off of DeWitt Avenue, south of Spring Avenue. This location should be designed to discourage parking on neighborhood streets.
3. Promoting the trail system as a healthy recreation alternative for the residents of Morgan Hill. Studies show that the presence of other trail users discourages undesirable behavior.
4. Actively working with affected neighborhoods to create an access system that respects the privacy of those residents.
5. Design and implement a comprehensive trail sign program for parking, access points, and points of interest.
6. Considering emergency response as a factor for establishing trail heads. Multiple trail heads improves the response time for police and fire.
7. Establishing a "Friends of El Toro" volunteer program to help promote the proper use of the trails, to help create a safe environment for trail users, and to help keep the trails free of trash.

8. Actively work with the Open Space Authority to assist with trail maintenance, environmental interpretation and education programs, and native species protection.
9. Engage Property owners about acquiring property rights to further the access strategy.

The updated proposed Access Strategy is attached to the report for review. While the strategy now provides for moving forward in development of a trail with a single trailhead and one access location, it does still include an option for future potential neighborhood access points. Both the OSA and City staff recommend that these future access points be left in the strategy as something that could be reviewed again in the future. The City staff would not work towards the creation of these access points at this time, but believe that they provide too many positive benefits, as outlined in the Access Strategy, to remove them from the plan completely and suggest that they continue to be reviewed in the future.

Once the access strategy has been approved, the next step will be to focus on working with the OSA to secure access for the identified trailhead location.

PRIOR CITY COUNCIL AND COMMISSION ACTIONS:

- City Council approved the Trails and Natural Resources Study in 2007
- City Council approved the purchase of the Acton property which provides an easement for the trail in 2010
- City Council approved TFCA grant funding for \$44,000 in 2012
- City Council approved CIP Budget for last two years in which the El Toro Trail Project is included
- In September of 2014 the Parks and Recreation Commission held a workshop and reviewed the El Toro Trail Access Strategy and made recommendations for modifications

FISCAL AND RESOURCE IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact related to approving the proposed El Toro Trail Access Strategy. Park, trail, and open space planning activities are included in the work programs for the Public Works and Community Services Departments.

CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act):

Not a Project

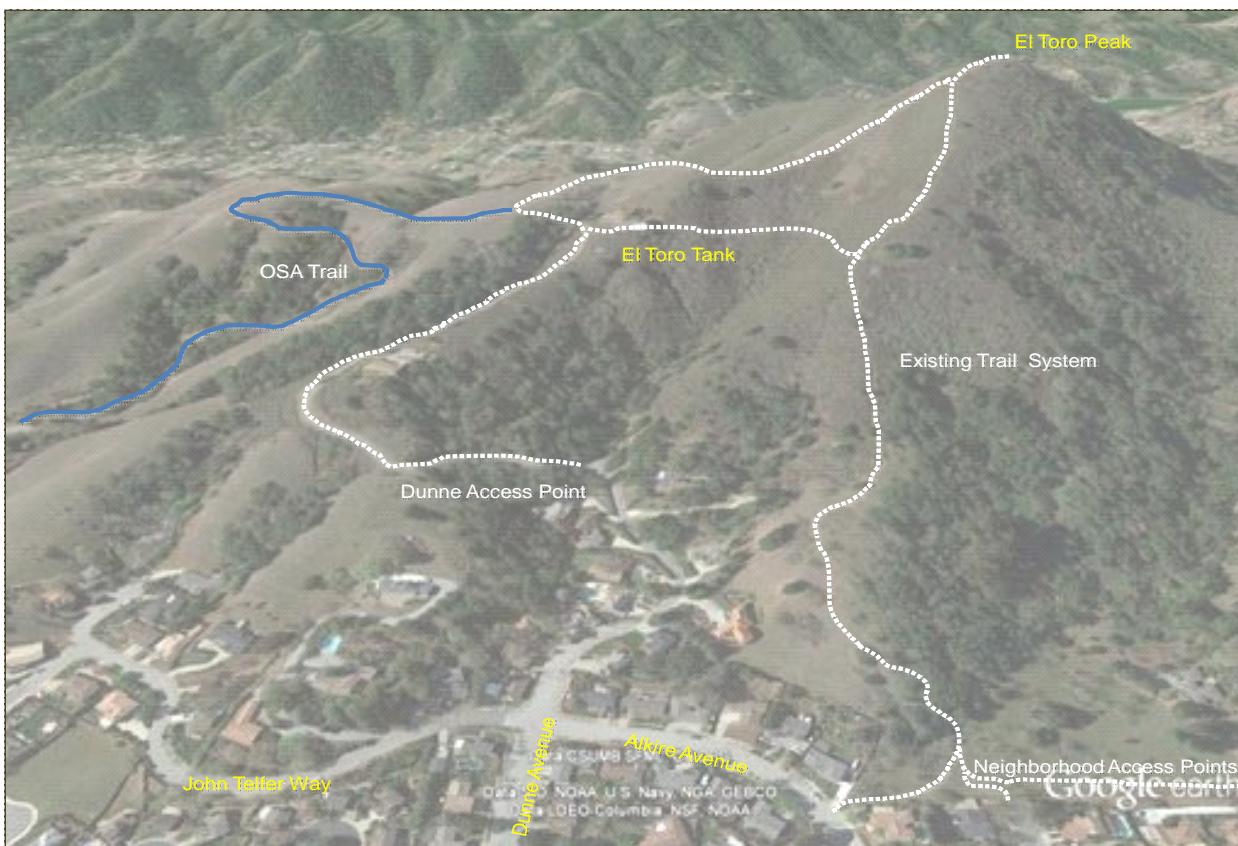
LINKS/ATTACHMENTS:

Proposed El Toro Trail Access Strategy

REVISED EL TORO TRAIL “ACCESS STRATEGY”

Formalizing an Existing Trail System

City Council Meeting
February 4, 2015



EL TORO TRAIL
REVISED ACCESS STRATEGY

PROJECT BACKGROUND

El Toro Mountain is located in the eastern foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains and provides the familiar west side backdrop for the City of Morgan Hill. It is one of the most visible landmarks in Morgan Hill with its silhouette marking the City's official logo. The informal trail system on the mountain has long been a hiking destination for local Morgan Hill residents and for years the Morgan Hill Historical Society sponsored an annual community hike to the summit which brought hundreds of hikers at a time wanting to enjoy the beautiful vistas and gain a better understanding of the history and geology of the area.

Throughout the years, the existing informal trail system has developed four access points adjacent to the base of El Toro Mountain, one at the end of Dunne Avenue, one at Alkire, one at end of Via Grande and one at end of Main Avenue. As time has passed and trail use continues, unsightly and unsafe trails with significant erosion have developed and can be seen from far away. These informal trails need to be re-vegetated in order to preserve the beauty of El Toro Mountain and prevent further erosion. At the same time, there is a real need for the community to access El Toro Mountain. This is evident by the hikers seen daily and the surveys done by the City showing that between 25 and 75 people access the mountain daily. In order to satisfy this need, new trails are being proposed that offer the community a more enjoyable trail experience and the opportunity to connect people with nature. In addition, the new trails offer defined trail parking areas, provide for trail amenities and trail maintenance, and provide for emergency access.

Recognizing the need for trails and sidewalk connections for Morgan Hill residents, the City Council commissioned the preparation of the City of Morgan Hill Trails and Natural Resources Study. It was officially adopted in late 2007. The study, also known as the Trails Master Plan, is intended to provide a pedestrian and bike system that will incorporate trails along creek corridors, parks, streets, and that will connect to public facilities, parks and open spaces. It is one of the guiding documents for the City to respond to the increased demands for recreational opportunities and to an awareness of the values that the surrounding natural environment provides to the growing population of the area. The Trails Master Plan goals were adopted from the City's General Plan, which includes:

- Community Development Goal 18- "Useful, accessible and high-quality parks, recreation and trail facilities and programs"
- Action 18.1-"Actively pursue acquisition of appropriate parkland for recommended parks, trails and facilities, and to meet existing and future recreation needs"
- Goal 18i- "Incorporate emergency services (fire and police) into the design review process for new parks, recreation facilities and trails"
- Goal 18j- "Continue to support development of the recreational facilities identified in the Morgan Hill Vision Process. These include the community and cultural center, community recreation center (with

senior and youth facilities), aquatics center, sports park/soccer complex, permanent skate park, and trails.”

- Goal 18f- “Encourage partnerships with public, non-profit and private agencies and organizations in the acquisition, development and long-term operations of parks, recreational facilities and trails.”
- Open Space and Conservation Policy 1a-“Work with the County, the Open Space Authority, appropriate conservancy organizations and land trusts, and property owners to preserve large open space areas, such as agricultural lands and outdoor recreation areas to conserve natural resources, retain the city's unique identity.”

The El Toro Trail project is also consistent with the Open Space Authority’s “Santa Clara Valley Greenprint,” A detailed land and resource conservation vision that will guide the Authority’s work over the next 30 years. To implement the Valley Greenprint, the Open Space Authority hopes to work with willing landowners to secure the rights for a public trail leading to the peak

Since the adoption of the Trails and Natural Resources Study, City staff has been working to add trails and sidewalk connections using grant monies where applicable. West Little Llagas Creek Trail, Madrone Channel Trail, and Butterfield Linear Park are a few examples of recent trail additions for Morgan Hill residents. A trail system on El Toro Mountain was included in the Trails Master Plan and \$44,000 in grant funding has been secured. While the maps and exhibits in the Plan show locations of a potential trail and potential access points, it is understood that the specifics of any portion of trail development requires proper planning and public input before implementation.

In 2010, the City Council approved the purchase of an 18-acre hillside parcel, known as the Acton property, for the purpose of expanding open space on El Toro Mountain, preventing future development of that parcel, and to provide a trail opportunity for the citizens of Morgan Hill. As a part of that purchase agreement, a trail access easement was acquired at the westerly terminus of Via Grande Drive. The easement is accessible from the end of Via Grande, a public roadway, and crosses private property retained by the sellers of the Acton parcel. In addition, the Open Space Authority (OSA) recently purchased a hillside parcel on the southerly flank of El Toro Mountain for the purpose of expanding their open space inventory and to provide a trail for all users that could easily connect to a trail system on El Toro. At this time, none of the Open Space property is open to the public.

In Summary, Staff has been working diligently to administer City Council’s goals and directives to provide the community with a trail up El Toro Mountain. Staff has held numerous community meetings as well as holding workshops through the Parks and Recreation Commission. Community input has been received and staff, in conjunction with the Open Space Authority, provided mitigation measure options to lessen the impacts to the affected neighborhoods. This revised “Access Strategy” is intended to address the community’s input while still adhering to City Council’s vision to provide for an enjoyable trail system for the community.

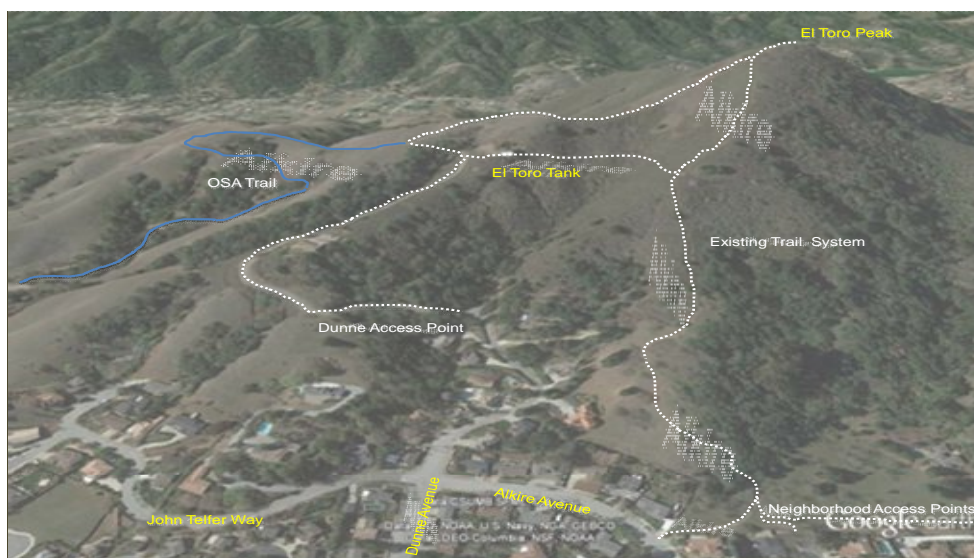
SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CITY COUNCIL ACTIONS

- City Council approved the Trails and Natural Resources Study in 2007
- City Council approved the purchase of the Acton property, which has an easement for the trail, in 2010
- City Council approved TFCA grant funding for \$44,000 in 2012
- City Council approved CIP Budget for last two years in which the El Toro Trail Project is included

THE NEED FOR AN ACCESS STRATEGY

Given the community's use of the El Toro Mountain a local hiking resource and based on previous City Council direction to provide more hiking opportunities, the City's Public Works staff has been laying out a preliminary trail system on the face of El Toro. After several neighborhood and individual property owner meetings and public discussions at Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) meetings, it is clear that identifying trail access points are a logical first step in developing hiking trails on El Toro.

The access strategy discussed in this report recommends the location within the Morgan Hill community for accessing El Toro Mountain. This access point would be located on DeWitt Avenue near Spring Avenue. The strategy also identifies future potential neighborhood access points that have been carefully thought out by staff and the OSA in order to provide the best trail experience for the community of Morgan Hill yet minimize resident impacts. These neighborhood access points take into account the neighborhood concerns; however, not all impacts can be completely mitigated. These neighborhood access points are not recommended for development by the Parks and Recreation Commission. However, these potential neighborhood access points could be of great value to the community and should be reviewed in the future as possible additions to the trail system. The future potential neighborhood access points would be located at Alkire, Via Grande and Main Avenue. These points will provide very convenient walking access from local neighborhoods and will reduce the need for residents to drive to a parking area. Before opening up any trails for public use, the access points to those trails must be carefully planned with community input.



Informal Trail System

TRAIL CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

The El Toro Trail project is currently in the planning phase and construction is not anticipated until an access strategy is approved and the access points are identified. The City first developed a conceptual trail plan for El Toro in early 2012 and then prepared a draft trail head plan for the Via Grande access. Staff shared these plans with the Via Grande neighborhood in a meeting with them in June of 2012. The meeting was productive in helping staff understand the thoughts and concerns of the residents living in that neighborhood. Those opposed to the trail project explained to staff that they are currently experiencing nuisance problems generated by people who are accessing El Toro from Via Grande. At the September 4, 2014 PRC meeting the same concerns were echoed by residents near the proposed neighborhood access points at Dunne, Alkire, Via Grand, and Main Avenues. The following is a summary of the concerns expressed by some of the residents at the meetings:

1. Quiet street now dealing with non-resident pedestrian traffic and increased noise
2. Concerns about non-neighborhood trail users and trail user vehicles parked on street
3. Noisy trail users in early morning and evening hours
4. Loitering at trailhead
5. Loss of residential parking, not enough trail user parking
6. Restroom accessibility
7. Potential for trail users to start fires and deter wildlife
8. Trail users leaving trash on the trail and in the neighborhood

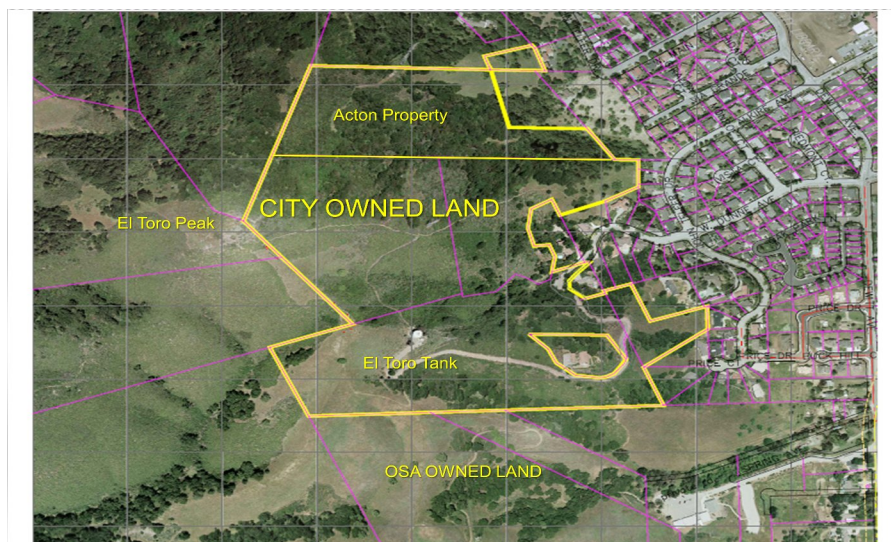
TRAIL PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- Develop and implement a community trail system on El Toro mountain consistent with the City's adopted General Plan policies and goals and Trails and Natural Resources Study
- Develop an access strategy that provides community access to El Toro mountain in a manner that provides for adequate amenities and respects neighborhood needs
- Involve the community in the decision making process and address neighborhood concerns
- Partner with the Open Space Authority to acquire land, maintain the trail system, and provide environmental education programs.
- Design a comprehensive and effective safety and security plan that is fiscally sustainable
- Restore the existing vertical trails to a natural condition by planting native materials
- Develop a "Friends of El Toro Trail" community volunteer program to help patrol, maintain, and keep the trail clean on a regular basis.

CITY OWNED LAND

The map below outlines the City owned property. The land is designated Open Space in the City's General Plan. The total acreage owned by the City is approximately 60-70 acres. The construction of trails is permitted in public open space lands. Also shown in the map is the 18 acre Acton parcel that the City recently

purchased. Also included in the purchase was a trail easement at the end of Via Grande for a future trail access point.



ACCESS STRATEGY

The Access Strategy is designed to strategically identify trail access points to El Toro Mountain with the appropriate trail head amenities in a manner that makes the trail available to as many citizens as possible while not overly burdening any particular neighborhood. The success of this strategy depends on securing a primary trailhead with parking and other trail amenities.

This can be accomplished by:

1. Creating one primary trail head: Primary trail head to have typical amenities such as parking lot, information kiosk, and potential restroom facilities. Public information should market primary trail head for those inclined to drive and park.
2. Focusing the location of a primary trailhead off of DeWitt Avenue, south of Spring Avenue. This location should be designed to discourage parking on neighborhood streets.
3. Promoting the trail system as a healthy recreation alternative for the residents of Morgan Hill. Studies show that the presence of other trail users discourages undesirable behavior.
4. Actively working with affected neighborhoods to create an access system that respects the privacy of those residents.
5. Design and implement a comprehensive trail sign program for parking, access points, and points of interest.
6. Considering emergency response as a factor for establishing trail heads. Multiple trail heads improves the response time for police and fire.
7. Establishing a "Friends of El Toro" volunteer program to help promote the proper use of the trails, to help create a safe environment for trail users, and to help keep the trails free of trash.
8. Actively work with the Open Space Authority to assist with trail maintenance, fauna and flora education and native species protection.

9. Engage Property owners about acquiring property rights to further the access strategy.

Staff has taken into consideration the valuable feedback received at multiple public meetings to create the revised "Access Strategy". While not every concern can be mitigated, the overall plan is designed for the good of the entire community while respecting the privacy concerns of local neighborhoods.

The Access Strategy would define trail access, provide for emergency access, and define trail amenities. In the long run, providing a trail to the summit of El Toro Mountain is equally important. The advantages of a trail system are; recreational health benefits, increased economic benefits, minimize existing undesirable behavior, and reduction in automotive travel to reach trailheads.



Revised Access Strategy Summary

- El Toro Trailhead Location-DeWitt Avenue North of Spring Avenue site. The focus of this location is to create the main access point for trail users. If possible, such a trail head should include convenient trail amenities such as vehicle parking, restrooms, trash receptacles, water station, bicycle racks, display kiosk, trail maps and signage. This trail head would also serve as emergency and maintenance access. This location in the south part of the City would serve the

Open Space Authority well since it is near the property they own. The advantages of this access point are: providing an easy to locate trailhead, providing convenient parking and trail amenities, providing for emergency access, and lessening the impact on existing residential areas. This access point is located just outside of the City limits, in a rural setting, thereby preserving the tranquility of the existing neighborhoods.

- Secondary Trailhead –Edmundson Tank site. This alternate site could potentially be a secondary trailhead should a site closer to the trail system not be available. In addition, the Trails and Natural Resources Study shows a neighborhood trail connection to the homes behind the Community Park. Emergency and maintenance access would still be off of DeWitt Avenue. The advantages of this alternate access point are; access and parking for visitors, easy to locate trailhead and convenient trail amenities.



Secondary Trailhead

- Access to Peak of El Toro
The City currently owns a large part of the east face of El Toro Mountain and a trail could be built within City owned property. However; staff recommends a longer, wider, and more gradual sloped trail to the top with fewer switchbacks for a more enjoyable trail experience. This will also preserve the face of El Toro Mountain by removing the existing informal trails and constructing the new trail on the south side of El Toro Mountain. To ultimately gain access to the full summit area it will be necessary to acquire property as open space or as an access

easement from private property owners. The City and the Open Space Authority have agreed to work together to pursue land purchase or easement rights necessary for a trail to the top if so directed by City Council. It must be pointed out that the City and the Open Space Authority only work with willing sellers. Staff will work with the Open Space Authority to acquire the necessary lands to the summit once approvals are established for trail access at the base of El Toro Mountain.



Peak of El Toro Mountain

- Potential Future Neighborhood Access Points (Not to be pursued at this time)

Alkire Avenue, Via Grande, and Main Avenue

These three access points are intended for use by local residents, provides north/south connectivity, and provide for multiple loop trails. These access points are currently being used. Using three access points instead of one spreads out the trail users and thereby reduces the impacts to adjacent home owners. Directional signage could also be installed to divert visitors to the primary access point.

The future potential neighborhood access points could provide small access points at all three streets that could converge to a recessed trailhead, where trash receptacles, dog bag dispensers, and a display board would be located. This trail segment is envisioned to be no more than 5 feet wide, so vehicle access would be limited. Advantages of the neighborhood

access points include: multiple access points to minimize resident impacts, unique recreational and wellness opportunities for residents near their homes, and additional trail mileage. The multiple access points approach is recommended to be reviewed again in the future, because it will spread out foot traffic, provide local residents with trail access without having to use a car, minimize greenhouse gases, provide expanded recreational opportunities and trail education programs for local schools.



Alkire, Via Grande & Main Access Points

TRAIL HOURS AND TRAIL USERS

The City will work collaboratively with the Open Space Authority to establish trail hours and allowed uses. Trail hours for other Open Space Authority maintained areas are typically restricted to sunrise until ½ hour past sunset. The Open Space Authority typically allows for multi use trails, such as; pedestrians, equestrians, and bicyclists. Equestrian use for this trail system seems unlikely due to the lack of horse trailer parking and due to a short trail system.

MAINTENANCE

The City is working with Open Space Authority to determine the most cost effective way to maintain the trail system. In addition, the City envisions a "Friends of El Toro" volunteer group to walk the trail system and collect trash along the trail corridor on a weekly basis. The Open Space Authority has also been successful with volunteer programs.

ON GOING TRAIL MONITORING

The City and the Open Space Authority will monitor trail use and make trail modifications as necessary for safety and security on a yearly basis. The City will continue to work with the community and impacted neighborhoods in order to address on-going issues.

SAFETY/SECURITY

The safety and security of trail users and surrounding neighborhood is paramount to the success of this project. The City (including its Police Department and Fire Department) is currently evaluating strategies to minimize potential unsafe conditions. As part of the project design process, safety will be a significant factor. It is important to understand prior to project construction, that the City is committed to ensuring that an effective safety plan is developed and ready for implementation. While both risks relating to fire and safety have been concerns of residents, the Police and Fire Departments believe that the creation of a formal trail will not increase any current risks and if constructed correctly could help to reduce some fire risks.

In addition to City and/or Open Space Authority staff monitoring, the City also envisions the aforementioned volunteer group to walk the trail periodically and report any suspicious activity to the local authorities. It is anticipated that both security and fire vehicular access would be provided at two locations; DeWitt/church site and end of Dunne Avenue. The trails themselves would provide for emergency access and much needed fire breaks on the mountain.

RETAIN EXISTING EASEMENT RIGHTS

The City obtained an easement at the end of Via Grande for public access when the Acton property was purchased, see Acton exhibit below. Staff recommends retaining this easement for potential future connectivity. In addition, staff recommends retaining the El Toro trails within the Trails and Natural Resources Study. This study is scheduled to be updated in late 2015 or early 2016.

